The historic bridges of Lewis and Clark County

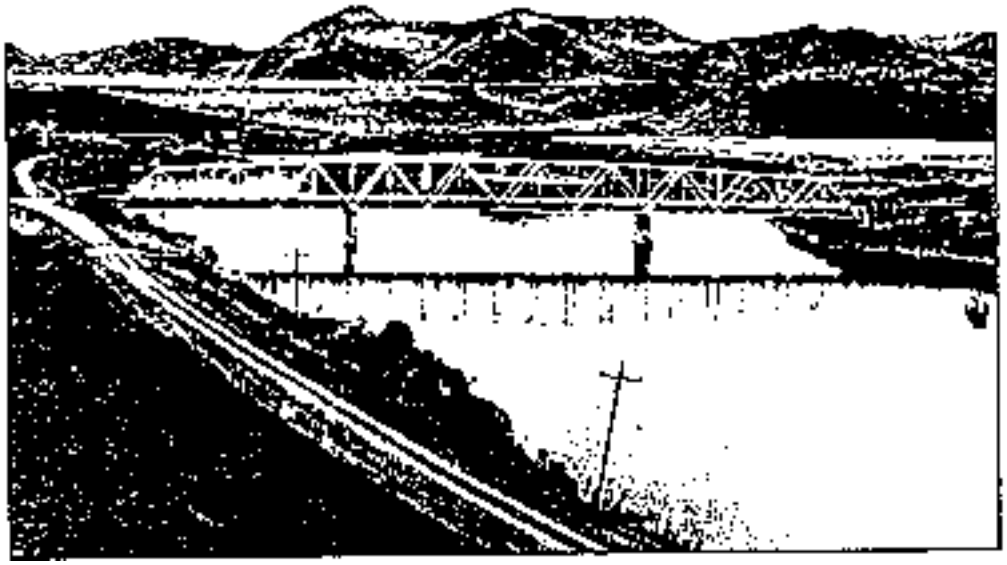
Historically, bridges are an important part of any community's economic and social well-being. Like the railroads before them, the presence of a bridge could make or break a young dynamic community. The expanded tax bases that resulted from the agricultural booms of the 1890s and 1910s allowed many communities to build substantial bridges, thereby permitting access to the railroads and to the town businesses.

Because there was no real mechanism for the state to construct bridges, the counties levied taxes for the expressed purpose of building bridges. The county commissioners were responsible for selecting the type of bridge they wanted and hired the bridge construction company to building it. This was the method used until 1915 when the Legislature mandated the Montana Highway Commission create a bridge department. Although the department designed bridges, the counties were financially responsible for their construction until 1926.

In 1926, however, the Montana Highway Commission and Bureau of Public Roads began an ambitious program of improving the state's transportation system. The Commission relieved the counties of their transportation responsibilities and assumed the task by designing the facilities and, with federal money, funding their construction.

The Great Depression stimulated the phenomenal development of Montana's transportation network between 1931 and 1941. Over 4,000 bridges were constructed in Montana during that decade. Two bridges in Lewis and Clark County are representative of these major periods of road and bridge construction. Both structures span the Missouri River just a few miles from each other. One was constructed with county funds by a private company, while the other was built with emergency funds allocated by the Legislature.

The Missouri River Bridge at Craig is an imposing five-span structure located just off Interstate 15 and is a striking reminder of the days when bridges were a much south after addition to rural Montana communities. Built in 1903 for $12,000 by the Elkhart Bridge Company of Elkhart, Indiana, the Craig bridge is the second oldest vehicular bridge over the Missouri River in the state (the oldest is the 1887 Fort Benton Bridge). The bridge originally consisted of three 136-foot pin-connected Pratt through trusses and two 30-foot pin-connected Queen-post pony truss approach spans (the east



The Missouri River Bridge north of Wolf Creek was built in 1933 at a cost of $54,785.49—a new record for cost per foot on a major bridge. (Photo by Jet Lowe)

span was removed sometime between 1957 and 1969).

The 480-foot bridge is the sole remaining bridge built by the Indiana company in Montana. Plaques located on the overhead members at each portal of the bridge name the Lewis and Clark County commissioners and surveyor i n1903, while the other plaque names the Elkhart Bridge Company as the builder of the structure. Plaques like these are common to large bridges in Montana.

The community of Craig began its existence as a fortified trading post in 1886. The Montana Central Railroad (later the Great Northern) reached the tiny settlement in 1887. The fertile rangeland located across the Missouri River lured a number of settlers to the area in the late 1880s and 1890s. They were hampered by the lack of a direct access to the rail yard in Craig. The bridge was likely the result of intensive lobbying by the local landowners. The bridge helped the community flourish during the boom years of the 1910s and maintained it through the lean years of the 1920 and 1930s. Today, however, the narrow width and restricted clearance of the bridge limits its usefulness as a farm access. It does remain, however, as a testimonial to the economical vitality of the Craig area and as one of a dwindling number of this type of bridge distinguishing the Montana landscape.

The Missouri River Bridge north of Wolf Creek is one of only five continuous span through truss bridges in Montana. Built in 1933 by the William P. Roscoe Company of Billings, the structure cost $54,785.49 - a new record for cost per foot on a major bridge. It was the first continuous truss bridge built in Montana (the other four bridges were constructed between 1940 and 1945). Incidentally, all were built by Roscoe. The company is still in business in Billings.

Unlike the older pin-connected through truss at Craig, this bridge consists of three riveted Warren truss spans of 135, 180 and 135-feet. The continuous truss functioned as a single unit with the weight of the dead and live loads evenly distributed through the structure (older truss spans functioned as individual units). For the 1930s, the Wold Creek Bridge was a novel concept in bridge design. The continuous truss spans were the last gasp of the trough truss in Montana. No more were built after 1946.

When the Great Depression hit Montana in 1931, the legislature enacted a “debenture” to fund construction of roads and bridges in Montana. The debenture was the state’s first real attempt to combat the depression by putting people to work - in essence an early version of the New Deal.

The bridge was designed by the Highway Commission’s bridge Department under the supervision of Benjamin Ornburn. The Commission let the contract for the structure in November, 1932 and construction began the following month. Roscoe employed 33 local men until the bridge was completed in 1933. The structure is located on Old U.S. Highway 91 and its construction coincided with the improvement of the highway.

For those looking for an afternoon road trip, take the I-90 exit at Craig, across the old bridge and follow the old highway through Wolf Creek Canyon. You’ll not only get a chance to view the bridges discussed above, but also the experience of driving a road constructed to 1930s high standards.

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